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ABSTRACT

A study examined patterns of language use, including intonation, in a single social group of high school students, six "nerd girls." The group formed an "anti-club" to celebrate the individuals' disparate interests. Student narratives and group exchanges are analyzed for expressions of nerd group affiliation and identity, indicated by both content and linguistic form. Characteristics identified include an intellectual orientation, enthusiasm for writing a poem, subversion of school values and conventionally "feminine" interests, use of a varied registers (formal, educated, and colloquial), and rejection of "cool" slang. Transcriptions include intonation marking. (Contains 6 references.) (MSE)

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"Why Be Normal?": Language and Opposition in Nerd Girl's Communities of Practice

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"Why be normal?":

Language and opposition in nerd girls' communities of practice

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Introduction

In 1989, Penny Eckert offered a very influential account of the social organization of a typical suburban U.S. high school. She found that students' social worlds and identities were defined by two polar opposites: the Jocks (the overachieving students who oriented to middle-class values) and the Burnouts (the underachieving students who were bound for work rather than college at the end of their high-school careers). Yet the dichotomy that separated these students also united them, for the ultimate goal of both groups was to be "cool." The difference lay in how each group defined *coolness*.

But not all high-school students share the Jocks' and Burnouts' preoccupation with coolness. A third group, the nerds, defines itself largely in opposition to "cool" students, whether Jocks, Burnouts, or any other social category. Nerds stand as the antithesis of all these groups, a situation Eckert succinctly captures in her observation, "If a Jock is the opposite of a Burnout, a nerd is the opposite of both" (1989:48). Despite the structural significance of the nerd category in the organization of youth identities, however, few researchers have examined its implications, and those who have tried have fallen far short of the mark in their analyses. Thus sociologist David Kinney (1993), in one of the rare studies of nerds, argues that in order to succeed socially, nerds must undergo a process of "recovery of identity" that involves broadening one's friendship network, participating in extracurricular activities, and heterosexual dating: in short, they must become Jocks. Another scholarly treatment of nerds (Tolone & Tieman 1990) investigates the delinquency and drug use of nerds in an article subtitled "Are Loners Deviant?" — in other words, are nerds really Burnouts?

What both studies overlook and what I will argue today is that being a nerd isn't about being a failed Burnout or an inadequate Jock.[2] It's about rejecting both Jockness and Burnoutness and all the other forms of coolness that youth identities take. Although previous researchers maintain that nerd identity is non-identity or deficient identity, I will show that in fact nerds, like Jocks and Burnouts, to a great extent consciously choose and display their identities through language and other social practices. And where other scholars seem to equate nerdiness with social death, I propose that nerds in U.S. high schools are not socially isolated misfits but competent members of a distinctive and oppositionally defined community of practice. Following the work of Penny Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, I wish to focus in particular on how nerdiness is an especially valuable resource for girls in the gendered world of the U.S. high school.

Nerds, gender, and the community-of-practice model

In my previous research (Bucholtz forthcoming) I described the social category of the nerd and detailed the linguistic practices through which nerd identity is forged. The primary values underlying this identity are individuality and intelligence, and these are reflected in nerds' linguistic practice: nerd girls' lesser use of the stereotypical "Valley Girl" vowel shift of (u) and (o) among California teenagers indexes their resistance to youth trends, while their often careful pronunciation and use of formal-register, Greco-Latinate vocabulary marks them as intelligent, as does their orientation to language form in such discourse practices as punning.

Because nerd girls' linguistic practices are interpretable only through the detailed investigation of the social context in which they occur, we need a correspondingly rich definition of community. The community of practice is such a model. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's highly influential 1992 survey article challenged scholars of language and gender to re-think traditional notions of community, identity, and gender. Previous sociolinguistic research on women centered on the speech community, a grouping defined by shared linguistic norms. By contrast, the community of practice attends to individuals not simply as speakers but as

participants in the complex workings of community. In this framework, speech is only one of the many social practices in which individuals engage. However, linguistic practices can often reveal important social information that is not available from examination of other community practices alone. For example, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) apply the theory of the community of practice to Eckert's Jocks and Burnouts study. Linguistic analysis revealed that the two groups had somewhat different vowel systems, with the most innovative vowels being those used by the "Burned-Out Burnout girls," that is, the most extreme members of this social category. This finding is surprising because boys and men are usually thought to use more nonstandard and innovative language than girls and women. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet argue that the vowels these girls use are resources through which they construct their identities as tough and streetwise and that they linguistically surpass the Burnout boys because unlike the boys, who can display their toughness through physical confrontations, Burnout girls must index their identities semiotically because fighting is viewed as inappropriate for girls. Thus, Burnout girls and boys share an orientation toward toughness in their community of practice, but the practice of toughness is achieved in different ways by each gender. By viewing language as equivalent to other social practices like fighting, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet are able to explain the ethnographic meaning of the Burnout girls' vowel systems and how language can acquire the empowering authority of physical force itself.

Nerds of course attain empowerment in very different ways than either Burnouts or Jocks. One of the primary ways nerds differ from these other, more trend-conscious groups, is through the high value they place on individuality. Unlike both Jocks and Burnouts, who must toe the subcultural line in dress, language, friendship choices, and other social practices, nerds are relatively unconstrained by peer group sanctions.

For girls, the construction of a nerd identity also offers an alternative to the pressures of hegemonic femininity, an ideology which is at best incompatible with and at worst hostile to female intellectual ability. Nerd girls' conscious oppositionality evident in every aspect of their lives. Where cool girls aim for either cuteness or sophistication in their personal style, nerd girls

aim for silliness. Cool girls play soccer or basketball; nerd girls play badminton. Cool girls read fashion magazines; nerd girls read novels. Cool girls wear tight T-shirts and either very tight or very baggy jeans; nerd girls wear shirts and jeans that are neither tight nor extremely baggy. Cool girls wear pastels or dark tones; nerd girls wear bright primary colors.

The community of practice model accommodates the individualism of the nerd social category without overlooking the strong community ties that unify the nerd girls in this study. The community of practice also lets us look at nerd girls in the same way Eckert and McConnell-Ginet viewed the Burnout girls: as speakers *and* social actors, as individuals *and* members of communities, and as both resisting and responding to cultural ideologies of gender.

The formation of a community of practice: The Random Reigns Supreme Club

In order to illustrate the utility of the community of practice framework, I will focus on a single social group within the nerd social category. One important distinction between the speech community and the community of practice is that the latter, but not the former, allows us to examine language use within social groups as well as social categories. Hence, the entire social category of nerds at the high school where I did my research constitutes a single community of practice insofar as its members engage in shared practices, but this category is divided into particular social groups whose members associate primarily with one another, and these groups form their own communities of practice. Unlike speech communities, communities of practice can be embedded or overlapping; their boundaries are determined not externally, by linguists, but internally, through ethnographically specific social meanings of language use. Ethnographic methods such as fieldwork therefore become crucial to the investigation of communities of practice.

The fieldwork that underlies the present study was carried out during the 1994-95 academic year at a San Francisco Bay Area high school that I call Bay City High. The social group of nerd girls that is the focus of this discussion is a small, cohesive friendship group that comprises four central members — Fred, Bob, Kate and Loden — and two peripheral members,

Carrie and Ada (Ada does not appear in the data that follow). All the girls are European American except Ada, who is Asian American. The same group also formed a club, which I will call the Random Reigns Supreme Club. (Though not its actual name, this name preserves the flavor of the original.)

Random Reigns Supreme is more properly described as an anti-club, which is in keeping with the counterhegemonic orientation of nerd identity. It was created by members in order to celebrate their own preferences, from Sesame Street to cows to Mr. Salty the pretzel man. Members emphasize the "randomness" of the club's structure: it is not organized around shared preferences; instead, any individual's preferences can be part of the club's de facto charter, and all six members are co-presidents. This structure contrasts with the corporate focus and hierarchical structure of most school clubs, which bring together people who are otherwise unconnected to perform a shared activity. The Random Reigns Supreme Club centers around members, not activities. It has no goals, no ongoing projects, no official meetings. Nevertheless, members proudly take their place among the corporate clubs in the pages of the school's yearbook. The girls' insistence on being photographed for the yearbook has a subversive quality: the photo publicly documents the existence of this otherwise little-recognized friendship group and demands its institutional legitimacy on par with French Club, the backpacking club, and other activity-based organizations.

Unlike a corporately organized club, which comes into being through charters, through participation in leagues, tournaments, and competitions, and through other official records and relationships, the Random Reigns Supreme Club is constituted through memory. It traces its history through routes of friendship. Thus narratives of the community's formation are an important unifying practice. Example (1) is such a narrative. (READ EXAMPLE)

(1)

Fred: Last year I was good friends with Kate but I never saw her on weekdays for some reason. I was sitting with this other group of people at lunch who were cool but they liked to talk about everyone who passed and make

> negative comments about everyone who passed and I just kind of sat there. _ At the end of the semester I said, "What am I doing? Why am I not hanging out with [Kate]?" And so I moved in with [her group of friends]. _ We're always the nerds. We like it. We're glad to be the nerds and the squares. We don't drink, we don't do any drugs, we just get naturally high, we do insane, funny things. And we're smart. We get good grades.

Fred emphasizes that her friendship with Kate is a matter of choice, not necessity. Expressions of nerd affiliation and identity are not always this explicit; as the following examples show, the details of interaction are important resources in defining a shared nerd identity within the club's community of practice. Example (2) is an extended example of a typical exchange in the Random Reigns Supreme community of practice. (PLAY TAPE OF EXAMPLE 2)

(2)
[02226/DC310,320]

```
1  Carrie:  Where where do those seeds come from?
2           <points to her bagel>
3  <laughter>
4  Bob:     [Poppies.       ]
5  Fred:    [Sesame plants.]
6  Carrie:  {But what do they look like?} <high pitch>
7  Fred:    I have no idea.  hh
8  Bob:     Sesame:.
9  Carrie:              [Is anybody- h]
10 Fred:    Ask me (.)  [tomorrow.    ]
11          I'll look it up for you. h
12 Carrie:  h Is anybody here knowledgeable (.)
13          about the seeds on top of bagels?/
14 Fred:                                    /Sesame.
15 Bob:     They're sesame?
16          They're not sunfl- ?
17          No,
18          of course they're not sunflower.
19 Loden:   Yeah,
20          [What kind of seeds are-                    ]
21 Carrie:  [Because sunflower are those whopping ones?]
22 Bob:     [Yeah.
23                Yeah.
24                     I know.                          ]
25 <laughter>
26 Bob:     They come from trees.
27          They have big trees and they just
28          [ra:in down seeds]
29          [<laughter>      ]
```

30 Carrie: [No they don't.]
31 Uh uh.
32 Why would little tiny seeds [come from-]
33 Fred: [{into baskets.}] <smiling quality>
34 Ye:p,
35 [({I've been there.})] <smiling quality>
36 Carrie: [No:.]
37 Loden: [No:.]
38 Bob: [[Little tiny leaves come from trees,]]
39 Fred: [[{And the whole culture's built around it,}]]
40 like in: some countries,
41 All they do is like the women come out and they have ba(h)skets on
42 th(h)eir h(h)ead and they st(h)and under a [tree,]
43 Carrie: [My-]
44 You sound like my crusty king,
45 I'm writing this (.) poem because I have to like incorporate these
46 words into a poem, and it's all about-
47 <interruption, lines omitted>
48 (Fred: So what about this king?)
49 Carrie: He's like (.) has this (.) castle,
50 (xxx: Is he xxx king?)
51 Carrie: No-
52 Yeah,
53 he is.
54 Loden: hh
55 Carrie: He has this-
56 {He has this castle, right?
57 except it's all crusty,}
58 <rustling of lunch bag, clanging of aluminum can>
59 (Fred: Uh huh.)
60 Carrie: And so he lives on a boat [in the moat.]
61 Bob: [A crusty-]
62 <Fred crushes her aluminum can>
63 Kate: Who:a!
64 <quiet laughter>
65 Bob: Is it really [crusty?]
66 Carrie: [He's-]
67 And so like the- like because- the people are trying to convince
68 him that like he should stay in the castle and he's all,
69 {"No, it's crusty!"} <high pitch, tensed vocal cords>
70 [<laughter>]
71 Carrie: [{"I'm in the moat!"}] <high,pitch, quiet>
72 right,
73 Bob: What's wrong with [crusty castles?]
74 Carrie: [And so-]
75 Well,
76 Would [you want to live]=
77 Kate: [Crusty (castles).]
78 Carrie: =in a castle full of crust?
79 {[i:ei:]} <noise of disgust and disapproval>
80 Kate: [How gross.]
81 Bob: [I mi:ght.]
82 Carrie: Huh?
83 Bob: What kind of crust?
84 Like,
85 bread crust?
86 Carrie: Like
87 Bob: Like [eye crust?]

```
88                [crusty crust.]
89          Like {boo:tsy} <high pitch, tensed vocal cords>
90          crust.
91 <laughter>
92 Bob:     Oh.
93          Well,
94          Maybe if it's bootsy,
95          I don't know.
96 Fred:    {Boot[sy!     ]}  <falsetto, sing-song>
97 Kate:          [<coughs>]
98 <laughter>
```

Both the content and the form of utterances in this exchange exemplify the concerns and values of the nerd community of practice. The orientation toward books (Fred, line 11: *I'll look it up for you.*) is not typical of most students at Bay City High; Carrie's enthusiastic recounting of the poem she wrote for a class — and the eager participation of others in this topic — is likewise rare among members of "cool" social categories. At the same time, however, Carrie's selection of subject matter for her poem is playfully subversive of school values and emphatically counter to traditional "feminine" topics. Bob also enters into the spirit of Carrie's narrative, repeatedly insisting on her own immunity from "gross" subjects like crustiness (lines 73, 81).

As the content of the discourse suggests, knowledge is highly valued in this community of practice. Thus, Bob quickly interrupts and corrects herself when she misidentifies the seeds on Carrie's bagel (lines 17-18) and when Carrie explains why Bob is mistaken the latter overlaps with her, offering three quick acknowledgments that are designed to cut off Carrie's turn (22-24).

Given this exchange, Bob's initiation of a new conversational direction makes sense. Bob jokingly provides an authoritative answer to Carrie's question (lines 26-28), and thereby skillfully shifts attention from her lack of knowledge to Carrie's. Fred eagerly joins in with the parody of scientific discourse, amplifying on the theme while supplying invented anthropological details that riff off of the discourse of a typical high school classroom. Such teasing episodes are frequent in this friendship group. But more importantly, this exchange is a collaborative performance of nerd identity: all the participants collide in sustaining the frame of an intellectual debate even as laughter keys the talk as play. Nerd identities are here jointly constructed and displayed.

Other performances of nerdiness are manifested in the details of speech style. Formal vocabulary projects a speaker's persona as smart and highly educated. Carrie, for example, selects this register in her question *Is anybody here (.) knowledgeable about the seeds on top of bagels?* (lines 12-13). Clearly, however, the girls are not stylistically limited to the formal register, unlike cool kids who use a more colloquial register regardless of speech situation. It is equally obvious that the phrasing of Carrie's question has an ironic undertone: after two questions in colloquial register (lines 1, 6) she shifts into a more formal style. Her unwillingness to overlap her turn with Fred's (lines 9-10) further suggests that the question is a performance of nerdiness, not just a manifestation of it. That is, Carrie is simultaneously displaying and commenting on nerd practice, showing her awareness of nerdy linguistic forms and announcing her willingness to enter a nerdy interactional space.

The multivalence of Carrie's speech is significant given her peripheral status in the Random Reigns Supreme Club. As a non-core member, she moves between friendship groups — in fact, the interaction in this example occurred when Carrie approached the core group in the middle of lunch period; afterward she moved on to another group. Carrie's social flexibility has made her a cultural and linguistic broker for the Random Reigns Supreme Club, which becomes aware of current youth slang largely through contact with her. Hence, many slang terms that circulate widely in the "cool" groups are labelled by Random Reigns Supreme members as "Carrie words" and are viewed as their friend's personal idiosyncrasies rather than as part of a shared youth vocabulary. Carrie's language patterns thus reflect her liminal position within the group. Note, for example, the reaction to Carrie's use of the slang term *bootsy* (which is a negative evaluative term). Bob and Fred echo it in different ways, to general laughter (lines 99, 101). Hence Carrie's performance of nerdiness places her within the community of practice, but her use of slang, as the other members are quick to let her know, moves her outside it. Right after this interaction took place Carrie abruptly headed off to another, "cooler" group.

Boundaries of the community

The issue of peripheral membership in the community of practice raises the question of boundaries. The previous example illustrates that nerd identity involves practices both of inclusion and of exclusion. Here the borders separating similar social groups into distinct communities of practice become visible — and audible.

The members of Random Reigns Supreme define themselves against other available varieties of nerd identity. For example, in (3a), the group is explaining to me what a Trekkie is; this category overlaps in some ways with the category of nerd. (PLAY EXAMPLE 3a)

(3a)
[02276/DC234]

```
1  Fred:    Like my sister?
2  <Kate bites into apple>
3  Fred:    Trekkie.
4           {She goes to the conve:ntions,
5           She [buys the stu:ff,=
6  Bob:         [Oh.=
7  Fred:                        =She has the}] <high pitch, sing-song>
8  Bob:             =That's Trekkie.          ]
9  Fred:    figurines {She has [[the ca:rds,]]} <high pitch, sing-song>
10 Bob:                        [[Wow.
11                                   Yeah. ]]
12 Fred:.   {She ta:pes them,
13          She buys the boo:ks,} <high pitch, sing-song>
14          <dental click>
15          [I just watch the show].
```

Here Fred uses intonation iconically to contrast the fanaticism of her sister's behavior with her own more acceptable practices. Fred's high rising pitch and list intonation linguistically mirror her sister's incessant pursuit of Star Trek-related activities. Her sudden intonational break, marked with a tongue click (line 14), dramatically juxtaposes the preceding discourse on her sister with her report of her own viewing habits. Her return to her ordinary voice quality (line 15) underscores the ordinariness of her actions. Language is thus used to carve out the acceptable boundaries of identity and community. The competing versions of nerdiness offered by Trekkies versus the Random Reigns Supreme girls underscore that nerd identity is a matter of choice, not fate.

It is important to emphasize, however, that decisions about boundaries are not always community-based, as they were in Example (2), in which the core members of the group work

together to marginalize a peripheral member. The issue of where to draw the border between Trekkies and Random Reigns Supreme turns out to be a question that individual members answer somewhat differently. This situation is illustrated in Example (3b). (READ EXAMPLE 3b)

(3b)

```
16 Loden:   [And all those people in the]
17          [[Trek]]ie club and stuff.
18 Mary:    [[Mm  ]]
19 Kate:    Oh yeah.
20          There's the club and-
21 Mary:    Yeah.
22          Hm.
23 Bob:     I was going to join it in ninth grade.
24 Fred:    h:
25 Loden:   h
26 Bob:     But I didn't.
27          I didn't walk inside.
28 Mary:    W(h)hy not?
29 Bob:     Because. h
30          I don't know w(h)hy.  hh
31 Fred:    Well-
32 Bob:     I don't remember.
33 Fred:    You have to feel kind of dumb when
34          you admit you're in the Trekkie [club]=
35 Bob:                                     [Mhm ]
36 Fred:                                        =anyway,
37          you know?/
38 Bob:               /Y- yeah.
39          I guess that was it.
40          I don't know.
```

Fred's definition of herself against the extremism of Trekkies also leads her to supply an explanation for Bob's behavior (*You have to feel kind of dumb when you admit you're in the Trekkie club*, lines 33-34). Bob's response, with its stammered beginning and hedged agreement markers (lines 38-40), is more a concession than full agreement. Here nerd identity is negotiated, and Bob accepts (perhaps under duress) Fred's judgment that to be a Trekkie is to go too far. Here Fred and Bob struggle over their own and each other's identities because as members of the same community of practice, each girl's self-definition affects the other's. Likewise, in Example 2, Carrie's linguistic choices were viewed not only as individual choices but as actions that affected the entire group. In such moments we see how the practices that make

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up the community come to be formed and invested with social meaning. Such meanings are often oppositional, given the social pressures that surround this community.

Conclusion

For much of its young existence, the field of language and gender has been a discipline in search of a paradigm. The familiar dichotomy between "difference"- and "dominance"-based approaches has been the organizing principle of much of the research, overshadowing other issues that have figured prominently in debates in other feminists' disciplines: the relationship of race, class, and gender; the connection between materialist and semiotic analyses; the role of individual agency within the larger social structure. Most models of community available to language and gender scholars leave little room for the individual. The most familiar — and most contested — of these models is the speech community, a concept which, in all its varied definitions, does not admit the individual. Similar concepts borrowed from adjacent fields, such as culture from anthropology, likewise emphasize social unity over individual variation. The theory of the community of practice, then, is a welcome alternative to these traditional approaches. By focusing on specific practices rather than shared assumptions, the community of practice balances the concerns of the community with those of the individual.

Transcription conventions

.	end of intonation unit; falling intonation
,	end of intonation unit; fall-rise intonation
?	end of intonation unit; rising intonation
–	self-interruption; break in the intonational unit
-	self-interruption; break in the word, sound abruptly cut off
:	length
underline	emphatic stress or increased amplitude
(.)	pause of 0.5 seconds or less

(n.n)	pause of greater than 0.5 seconds, measured by a stopwatch
h	exhalation (e.g., laughter, sigh); each token marks one pulse
.h	inhalation
( )	uncertain transcription
{ }	stretch of talk over which a transcriber comment applies
< >	transcriber comment; nonvocal noise
[ ]	overlap beginning and end
/	latching (no pause between speaker turns)
=	no pause between intonation units

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